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PLIGHT



Friar Tuck dealt Little John a tremendous buffet on the side of the head which sent the big yeoman staggering among the stew-pots.

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IN DESPERATE PLIGHT

Telling of the Thrilling Adventures of Robin Hood and Maid Marian after Treacherous Normans had put the Foresters to Flight.

CHAPTER 1.

Will Scarlet Meets his Match.

MAY DAY had come again.

Every leaf and blade of grass was spangled with dewdrops, which glittered in the early morning sun as if the wood-elves had decked them in diamonds in honour of the merriest day of the year.

The birds, not to be behindhand in celebrating the occasion, were early astir. The blithe notes of thrush and blackbird, warbler and finch, rang from every coppice; while from far aloft, over the sweeping glades of Barnsley Dale, trilled the exultant song of the lark.

As the first ray of the rising sun gilded the topmost branches of the great forest oaks, a giant figure reclining on the sward began to stir within the cloak of Lincoln green which muffled it from head to heel. A brown and bearded face was thrust out, and then, after much knuckling of the eyes with great leg-of-mutton fists and a yawn so prodigious that it seemed impossible for the glistening rows of strong white teeth ever to be brought together again, the man scrambled to a sitting posture and blinked sleepily at the scene before him.

"May morning," growled he, with a sudden display of energy, as the memory of the day flashed upon him— "May morning, and yet, by the rood! the whole camp snores like a drove of

hogs after a surfeit of acorns! In sooth, some of them will start the feast with smarting hides an they bestir themselves not quickly! Ho, there! Lightfoot, Reynold, Much! Rouse out, you scurvy knaves, rouse out!"

A great trencher of brass lay handy to his elbow, and seizing this, he flung it among the stewpots which surrounded the dead camp-fire. It fell with such a mighty clatter that three score of men who had lain like logs struggled to their feet, clutching wildly for weapons, under the belief that the Normans were upon them.

"Quarter, quarter! I prithee! Spare me, for I am but a man of peace!" came in muffled gasps from a huddled bundle which writhed and squirmed as the occupant strove desperately to free himself from the tight-clinging folds.

The piteous appeal was hailed by the yeomen with roars of laughter, which, nevertheless, failed to reassure the entangled one, who still cried lustily for

mercy, and fought to get his head and hands free.

"Nay, by my faith!" cried Little John, taking up the cue and belabouring his victim on the softer parts of his anatomy with a pikestaff. "Mercy is not for the likes of you, Jack Priest!"

A smart prick in the back with the spear-point elicited a yelp from his victim which brought a figure to the door of a hut of wattled twigs, thatched with bracken, which stood within the clearing.

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The figure was that of Robin Hood.

"How now, good Little John! At your May-day revels already, and our good priest not yet out of his bed?" said the outlaw chief, joining in the roars of laughter which greeted every fresh struggle of the animated bundle now beginning slowly to unwind itself.

At last a plump brown hand appeared, and then a cowl was flung back, disclosing a shaven bullet-head and round red face, from which two angry eyes glared upon his persecutor.

"So it's you, you long, lumpish, grinning lout, is it?" spluttered the enraged friar, extricating himself from his wrappings, and rising to his feet with a deliberation which boded trouble. "So it's the brave Little John who sets upon me when I sleep, fearing to meet me when I stand upon my legs in light of day! A May morning revel this, is it? By Saint Dunstan! but methinks you have mistaken it for All Fools' Day! Take that, you great, grinning giant!"

Friar Tuck had strode over to where the big yeoman was standing, still shaking with laughter, and with his left hand had given Little John's nose a smart tweak, while with his right hand he dealt him a tremendous buffet on the side of the head, sending him staggering among the stew-pots, until, losing his balance, he fell into the capacious mouth of one of these, and there sat securely wedged, with his knees jammed up to his chin.

It was the turn of the outlaw Hercules to be laughed at now, and the woods rang with the delighted guffaws of the jolly foresters.

Little John roared, too, but not with laughter. His head was ringing with the blow which his jaw had received, and the sharp edge of the pot seemed to be cutting into his flesh. But the more he howled for help, the more his comrades racked themselves with laughter.

At last Robin Hood and Will Scarlet were constrained to go to his rescue, and by dint of much pulling and thumping, set him free.

"Where is the saucy priest?" foamed Little John, as he swabbed the mess of cold fat and gravy from off his nether

garments with handfuls of bracken. "Come hither, good friar, and let me embrace thee."

But Friar Tuck, thinking discretion the better part of valour, had seized the opportunity to withdraw from the conflict, though a mocking laugh which echoed from the surrounding woods showed that he was not far away.

"Come, Little John, mar not this merry day with bad blood," said Robin Hood coaxingly. "The friar did but exchange blow for blow; and moreover, if I remember aright, the balance of buffets is still in your favour. Let us to breakfast, and doubtless Jack Priest will meet you with quarter-staff, or perhaps bare fists, at the revels this noon-tide."

In the stir of getting the great fire going and the preparation of the morning meal, the ruffled plumes of the aggrieved giant gradually smoothed themselves, and when the pot of venison collops had been handed round and three-score sets of teeth were hard at work, he had so far recovered himself that the appearance of the friar upon the opposite side of the fire only elicited a growl and a glance from his dark eyes which told that the peace was only a patched one, and like to fall to bits at the first favourable opportunity.

Friar Tuck's face, on the other hand, wore such a smile of bland innocence that anyone who had seen his attack on Little John could scarce have credited that this was the same man.

Their fast broken, the band was soon hard at work in the glade, for had not a proclamation set forth, under Robin Hood's own hand and seal, that on this May-day high revel would be held in Barnsley Dale, to which all good Saxons, young and old, were invited?

A maypole had to be garlanded and raised, round which the young men and maidens might dance, while at the further end, a good sixty paces from the centre of the dell, were set up white wands of fresh-peeled ash, scarcely thicker than a man's thumb, which were to serve as targets for those skilled with the bow.

Of eatables and drinkables there was almost enough to provision an army.

Barons of beef, haunches of royal venison, sides of smoked bacon, and rows of giant pasties were produced from sheltering booths, and Maid Marian and her women attendants were hard at work setting out the feast on the sweep of mossy sward which was to serve as a table.

Butts of light wine and casks of nut-brown ale were ensconced firmly in niches among the gnarled roots of the towering oaks, and Friar Tuck was here, there, and everywhere with mallet and spigot, performing the self-allotted task of cellarer-in-chief to the feast.

As the sun rose higher, the country-folk came streaming in, and soon the glade was a moving mass of gay colour, for everyone was in his best, and every girl was wearing her brightest kirtle in honour of the occasion.

Bows were already twanging at the butts, and the young archers of the countryside pressed eagerly forward to try their skill against the famous bowmen of Robin Hood's band.

They met with sorry success, however, for where they could plant an arrow a foot from the mark, the poorest marks-men of the outlaws could better them by eleven inches, while the best could split the wand six shots out of every twelve.

"So, so, my merry blades," chaffed Will Scarlet, whose skill at the butts had drawn a crowd of gaping admirers round him. "Never was trick so simple—a plain bow of good English yew, strung with simple English hemp, and a shaft of our own fashioning, tipped with a grey goose pinion. See! there is naught of magic in the notching and the drawing—nay, nor in the shooting of it; for, there! the arrow flies straight and true, and if it splits not the further wand I'll give you a noble apiece."

A long-drawn "Ah!" swelled from the crowd as the arrow flashed on its way and cleaved the sapling in twain.

"By the bones of my grandfather, but it smells of black magic!" muttered one old woodcutter, whose rheumatic limbs were as knotted almost as the oaks which fell to his axe. "Why, my eyes can scarcely see the mark, and yet this young stripling can pierce it as easily as if it were a reed stack at twenty paces."

"Your eyes are old and grown dim, master. The wand is nigh as thick as my wrist, and I count it no great skill to lodge an arrow in at sixty paces—ay, or a hundred even, for the matter of that."

Following immediately upon Will Scarlet's superb feat of archery, the speech was a bold one, and every eye was instantly turned upon the speaker.

He was a tall, thick-set man, clad in drab fustian, after the fashion of the men who found their living in the forest. He stood with arms folded, leaning carelessly upon a crossbow of excellent make and great strength.

A grim, defiant smile played over his swarthy features, and the bold, dark eyes which flashed from under the shaggy eyebrows were fixed steadily upon Will Scarlet, as if in direct challenge.

The young outlaw met look for look, and the group of spectators gathered closer, for there was a promise of rare sport.

There was a curl upon Scarlet's lips as he said:

"Those be plain words, Master Crossbowman, and, since you count it no great skill to cleave the mark at sixty paces, doubtless you will show good reason for despising the feat by capping my arrow with your bolt. After that I may yet be able to prove to your satisfaction that a Saxon bow is as good, if not better, than Norman crossbow."

The swarthy woodman betrayed no sign that the gibe at his foreign weapon had stung him, but picked up his bow and advanced to the shooting-mark without a word.

Stringing the bow by means of the windlass which was fitted to the butt, he opened a pouch full of short steel quarrels (as the square-headed arrows for the crossbow were called) and, carefully selecting one, placed it in position.

The wand at which Will Scarlet had aimed stood at the further end of the glade, split from top to middle, and the arrow was still stuck in the cleft, driven up to the feathered head.

The woodman raised his crossbow and took a swift aim.

The steel arc sprang back with a

ringing twang, and the quarrel whirred down the glade.

There was a shout of admiration as the wand was seen to fly in two halves, allowing Scarlet's arrow to drop to the ground.

"A hit—a hit!" cried the crowd.

"Ay, a fair hit, by Heaven!" growled Little John, who had come up to see what all the stir was about. "Will, my lad, you must better that bolt. The honour of our band depends upon it."

"Have no fear, Little John," laughed the young forester easily. "I never yet came upon a crossbow that could out-shoot this old yew stave, and the contest has only just begun. Stand aside and let me set this good fellow a new test."

Walking to the extreme end of the glade—a full ninety paces from the shooting-mark—he planted two fresh-peeled wands, scarcely thicker than a man's two fingers, firmly in the turf.

"Mark you the conditions, friend," he said, returning to where the crossbowman stood. "With my back to the mark I will walk away ten fair paces; and at the tenth step I will turn, draw bow, and shoot, before this old gaffer, here," turning to the ancient woodcutter, "can repeat the name of our chief, Robin Hood, three times. Is it a contest?"

"As you please," said the woodman quietly. "But first of all, I must be allowed to bend my bow, for there you have me at a disadvantage."

"By all means. Does it please you that I should shoot first?"

The crossbowman bowed his head in assent, and Scarlet notched a shaft to the string and strode ten paces from the mark.

At the tenth the old woodcutter, as proud as a young cockerel at the honour which had been thus suddenly thrust upon him, began to gabble out:

"Robin Hood! Robin Hood! Robin—"

Before the name could be completed for the third time Will Scarlet had drawn the bowstring to his ear, and after a swift glance along the shaft had loosed it on its journey.

"Missed!"

The word went up from a hundred throats.

The wand shook as if the arrow had touched it in its flight, and a thin slip of white hung from its side, but it could not be claimed that it had been pierced.

"Plague on it, Will!" said Little John sourly. "How comes it that you let a woodman with a catapult like that beat you? Faith, I had a better opinion of your archery."

"No matter," Will Scarlet said, biting his lips with annoyance. "I will abide by my shot, which, after all, has scraped a splinter of bark from the wand. Now let our friend here make a better."

"'Tis a good shot enough, Master Scarlet, and one no good archer need be ashamed of. But if my eye fails me not, and the old bow twangs true, then I may better it. Stand aside, good people."

The stranger set his foot in the stirrup of the crossbow, and bent the strong steel arc until the string was caught in the trigger notch. Then he laid a short, feathered and steel-barbed quarrel on the grooved barrel, and carelessly strode ten full paces from the mark.

At the tenth Old Simon cried:

"Robin Hood! Robin Hood——!"

But before he could repeat the signal the third time, there was a resounding clang, and the bolt sped on its way.

The wand was struck with a glancing shot and knocked almost to the ground, the quarrel flying off at an angle and embedding itself in a tree.

"A hit! a hit!" roared the excited onlookers.

"Nay, masters, it was no better than the first," protested the woodman modestly. "See, the wand is still unharmed, though, had my bolt served me honestly, it had split the wood, I'll warrant."

"Well said, my good fellow," answered Robin Hood, who had been attracted to the scene in time to hear Will Scarlet's challenge and the resultant contest. "It was a brave shot, and here is my hand upon it. Truth, I have no liking for the Norman weapon, but I love a marksman well, whether he shoots with shaft or quarrel."

"It were pity to see a Saxon—if

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Saxon he be—turning his back on English yew and taking up with a new-fangled French bow, which may shoot as true at a hundred paces as ours, but is no more use than a bulrush against a steel breastplate at half that distance."

The growl came from Little John, who stood silent and surly, glaring at the woodman who had dared to match his skill against outlaw craft and come off with flying colours.

The sneer did not escape the ears for which it was intended.

The stranger flushed up in an instant and faced the giant as if he were as much beneath him in stature as he was above.

"See you, Master Longlegs—for if that be not your name it is one that would fit you excellently—there is a sting in your words which I may tell you is not much to my taste. I would have you know that there is not a drop of blood in my veins, or bone in my body, that is not as truly English as any in your great carcase."

"Keep a shrewder grip of that tongue of yours, my good fellow," Little John exclaimed threateningly, "or I may take the trouble to satisfy myself that what you say about your blood and bones is true by turning your skin outside in."

"A fig for your threats! By the name of Wat o' the Woods am I called in my own country, and those who know me know that I brook no insults from any man, be he as big as a haystack. As for my crossbow here, it is one that I wrested from a better man than you, and, having won it, set about to learn the use of it."

Little John set back his great head and laughed.

It was an ugly laugh, and his comrades trembled, for they saw that trouble was brewing, and, sturdy though the stranger undoubtedly was, they felt he could not stand for a minute against the herculean muscles of the giant.

Before one of them could interfere, Wat o' the Woods strode over to where the forester was standing.

Little John's lips were curled in a

terrible smile, strangely at variance with the clenched teeth which they revealed within. His eyes flashed like those of some savage animal which has been baited to the limit of its endurance. But the gaze was met by eyes no less steady than his own.

Wat o' the Woods stepped boldly up to his antagonist, and, with a single buffet sent him reeling.

CHAPTER 2.

A Terrible Surprise.

The crowd fell back amazed at the stranger's daring, and the shouts of astonishment which went up at once brought the rest of the merrymakers running to the scene.

The musician who had been piping to the dancers, blowing away at his primitive instrument with his eyes shut in a dream of ecstasy at his own music, suddenly opened them to find himself deserted.

Even those who had come mainly to eat and drink of the good things for which Robin Hood's merrymakings were justly famous, set down their platters and cups and hurried across the glade to see what was in the wind.

"What in the name of St. Dunstan can be the matter?" thought Friar Tuck. "By my faith! if it be a quarrel, they have started full early, for the sun has scarcely reached mid-heaven. As a man of peace, I suppose I must go over and see what is amiss, but, by the rood! if it is that ruffian, Little John, whose head I see plunging about above the crowd like a cork in a mill-race, there is no knowing but what I may counsel his antagonist between the bouts!"

The fat friar went bouncing over the green turf, his speed increasing at every step, for, as he grew nearer the crowd, the more certain he became that it was his old enemy who was engaged.

After the first buffet Little John had pulled his scattered senses together, and, with a roar of rage and pain, had hurled himself at the woodman.

But it was not Wat's intention to be caught in the giant's grip if he could prevent it. With an agile twist he

escaped Little John's grasp, and springing round, dealt a terrific back-handed blow on the forester's ear as he lurched by.

With a howl the giant swung on his heel and grappled with his assailant. But swiftly ducking beneath his arms, Wat caught him by the loose folds of his leather boots, and, aided by the impetus of the charge, pitched him clean over his head, to fall with a mighty thud, full length, on the soft turf.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" yelled a voice which everybody recognised as Friar Tuck's. "Goliath has met his match at last. See him rubbing that red nose of his in the dirt! See how he crawls upon his hands and knees. Ho! ho! ho!"

Little John was indeed on his hands and knees, but it was not for long.

Slowly raising himself erect, for the fall had shaken him somewhat, he paused and faced his antagonist.

The woodman stood crouched like a panther prepared to spring.

"So it's Wat o' the Woods they call you," the outlaw giant said slowly. "Well, you are the first that ever threw Little John over his head like that, and I hope the last. But by the bones of my forefathers, I have not finished with you yet! Make a ring there, and you, Jack Priest, keep a more civil tongue in your head, for I have still a bone to pick with you!"

The crowd pressed back into a wide circle. Maid Marian and her fair retinue were there to watch the bout, and many a pair of pretty eyes glowed with excitement as the two champions circled round each other.

Again Little John made a dash, and again Wat o' the Woods eluded him; but at last the giant gripped him, and the two men swayed and twisted in an iron embrace.

The strength which the stranger displayed was amazing, and the outlaws saw that their champion had all his work cut out to win the match.

Once Little John swung his opponent into the air and flung him down; but Wat managed to alight upon his feet, and the struggle went on.

The result was still in doubt when

suddenly a cry was heard from the woods, and yet another from the opposite direction.

Robin Hood's face paled, for he knew that the shouts came from the sentinels.

Was it possible that the camp was attacked?

As if in answer to the mute question, a forester came running into the clearing.

"To arms! to arms!" he shouted. "The Normans—"

Then his hands flew up, there came a choking cry, and he pitched forward on his face.

Fast between the man's shoulder-blades stood out the end of a cross-bow bolt. It was the herald of a flight, which whizzed from every quarter into the glade.

In a minute the woods rang with the screams of the women, the groans of the wounded, and the cries of the panic-stricken.

The Normans had timed their stroke well.

Not only had they effected a complete surprise, but with their camp encumbered with unarmed strangers the outlaws were at a terrible disadvantage.

Again a flight of quarrels swept the glade, carrying death and confusion to every corner.

The hoarse shouts and the crashing of bushes, as the Normans rushed to the attack, seemed to come from every quarter.

At the short, sharp commands which fell from Robin Hood's lips the outlaws quickly freed themselves from the mob of affrighted countryfolk and scattered right and left to stem the invading torrent.

Satisfied that all had been done that was for the moment possible, Robin went in search of Maid Marian and her assistants and set them in a sheltered corner to await the worst.

Friar Tuck, quarter-staff in hand, with Wat o' the Woods, who in all the confusion had kept cool and calm, mounted guard over the fair charges.

"Save them, good comrades, if it costs you your lives, I beseech you!" said Robin Hood, with terrible earnest-

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ness. "And if the camp is rushed by these Norman hounds, make for the northern track, and pray Heaven I may be able to come to your help. Good-bye, Marian, sweet lass! Keep a brave heart, and never lose hope."

With a bound he leaped into the scant forest undergrowth and headed for the quarter from which the sounds of the conflict came thickest.

Already many of the countrymen, who had recovered from their momentary panic and realised the terrible danger with which they and their wives and sweethearts were threatened, had armed themselves with weapons of every sort, and were now hurrying to the fray.

Rallying these around him, Robin Hood plunged on to where the thin line of archers were holding the foe in check. But the sight of the swarm of steel caps beyond, glinting and glancing among the green, made the outlaw chief's heart almost sink within him, for he knew they were outnumbered.

Back and back, foot by foot, the line was driven inwards, and all the time the hail of whirring bolts never slackened.

Again and again Robin Hood headed a desperate charge upon the Normans; but the tangle of briars and underwood wore down the fury of the attack, and they were compelled to fall back, breathless and disheartened.

A terrible shouting from the further side, and the despairing screams of the huddled pack of women in the glade, made the line break in horror, and the Normans swept in.

Then, as the undergrowth grew thinner and the way more clear, there came the trampling of horses, which swelled to the thunder of the charge.

The Norman spearmen were upon the Saxons!

In vain to the battle-cry of "Sweet Liberty or Death!" did Robin Hood endeavour to rally his motley troops to withstand the furious attack.

His own yeomen stood staunch and true, twanging shaft after shaft into the steel-clad ranks; but it was like attempting to drive back the waves with pebbles.

Prince John had vowed a hundred times to exterminate these turbulent outlaws of Sherwood Forest, and it looked as if his oath was to be fulfilled at last.

Three hundred foot and two hundred horsemen had been sent to surround the camp of Robin Hood on that May day and entrap not only the men whose lives Prince John had sworn to take, but also those who had dared to set his mandate at defiance and traffic with the foresters in their outlawry.

All seemed lost.

Inch by inch the circle of Lincoln green and brown fustian had grown narrower until the borders of the glade were reached.

Behind were the women and in front the Normans, who now came on with savage cries of victory.

It was a case of everyone for himself.

Robin Hood's first thought was for the safety of Marian and her women-folk.

Was it possible that they could escape from the fearful massacre which was impending?

If he could satisfy himself of that, then he would lay down his life cheerfully in an effort to defend the rest.

But the day was already lost.

Amid battle-cries and shouts of victory, the steel caps burst into the glade, and behind and through them rode the horsemen, striking down men and women, old and young, in their fury.

With frantic haste Robin Hood forced his way to where he had left Maid Marian; but there was no trace of her to be seen.

Friar Tuck, too, was missing; only Wat o' the Woods' crossbow was left, half-shorn through by an axe-stroke, and useless.

What cruel fate had been theirs?

The outlaw chief stood helpless, a dull dread gnawing at his heart.

A clatter of hoofs, a mail-clad figure towering above him, an arm uplifted, brought him to his senses. He leapt on guard, and his blade parried the death-stroke just as the charger hurled him to the earth in its mad gallop.

A dozen horsemen rode over him, though not a single hoof touched his

body, and he knew that the Normans had taken him for dead.

Lurching to his feet, dazed and sick; Robin stood among the lifeless forms which strewed the path of the charge.

A giant figure in Lincoln green sprang to his side, and a strong arm seized him round the waist and dragged him from the stricken field.

It was Little John who had thus come to the aid of his chief, and whose voice was now beseeching him to hasten for his life.

As they got further and further away from the din the air seemed to grow clearer and sweeter, and Robin's senses slowly returned to him.

At first he was for going back, but Little John gripped him fiercely and still hurried him on.

"I must return to Marian!" Robin cried. "Great heavens! what if she has fallen into the hands of those curs? Unhand me, Little John—unhand me, I say, and let me go back!"

"Nay, master; keep on! Keep on! Maid Marian is safe or dead by now. The friar and Wat o' the Woods, and half a dozen good men they had rallied, escaped with them into the woods at the first rush of the horsemen, and 'tis likely they got away unscathed. On, on, Robin Hood! They may need us yet, and we are following hard upon their trail."

A great sigh of relief burst from Robin Hood's white lips, and fresh strength seemed to fill every sinew of his body.

"On! on!" he echoed, and the two pushed their way through thickets of clinging brier and sharp thorns, heedless of scratch and cut, heading their course as the crow flies in the direction of the northern track.

Suddenly a burly figure leaped from behind a giant tree with flashing blade raised to strike. But at the same instant a voice cried:

"Ah! it's you! Thank Heaven I stayed my hand in time!"

It was Wat o' the Woods.

"I heard the sound of pursuit, and I stayed behind to hold the hounds in check as long as possible," he said, breathlessly.

"But Maid Marian! where is she?" demanded Robin Hood.

"Safe so far, though there is yet danger. Follow me. I know this part of England well, and may help you to escape the Normans yet."

CHAPTER 3.

The Battle at the Ferry.

ROBIN HOOD'S heart was full of gratitude to this brave man, and he would fain have expressed his thanks, but the woodman had already set his face to the north, and was running forward, clearing bush and brake like a hunted deer. Little John and Robin Hood followed as fast as they could.

Presently the three came in view of the little convoy.

The womenfolk, half-dragged, half-supported by the rough yeomen, were being swept along, while Friar Tuck brought up the rear, quarter-staff on shoulder, casting many an anxious glance behind.

The sight of Robin Hood and Little John made the good man's face beam with joy, and gave new heart to the fugitives, sad as they were at the thought of the fate of their comrades.

"Whither are we going?" asked Robin Hood of Wat o' the Woods, as soon as he had satisfied himself that Marian had escaped unscathed.

"First to the ferry at Carsbrook, there to cross the Don, and then—well, we will think of that later. With the river behind us, methinks we can count ourselves safe from pursuit," answered Wat.

"You are a brave fellow, friend, to stand so sturdily in the defence of such outlaws as ourselves," said Robin Hood, gratefully. "If I could get aid from a hundred brave hearts such as you, this cruel massacre should not long go unavenged. But, alas! the greater part of my band has been wiped out, and with it a hundred innocent folk."

"Courage, good sir! Your nearest and dearest is still unharmed; and as for brave men, thank Heaven there are as many to be found in England to-day as blackberries on a bush in September. Hark! what was that?"

There came a distant shout from the forest on their right.

"Normans, by the rood!" cried Little John, "or they would be more chary of betraying their presence here."

"Normans or friends, we must keep on, for our only chance lies in reaching the river. On, brave hearts, or they may head us off. Another mile will bring us to safety."

The now almost exhausted party hastened wildly forward. But strive as they would, the shouts seemed to come nearer, and now and again Robin Hood's ears caught the clank of steel on steel.

"Hark you, Master Longlegs, or whatever they call you," said Wat o' the Woods, sidling up to Little John and speaking in a low voice, "the ferry is still a half-mile in front of us, and at this rate the Normans will be there to seize it first. Now, I have a plan."

"Out with it, then," growled the giant, a trifle nettled at his late adversary's cool demeanour.

"You are a man of mettle, as I know to my cost," continued the woodman. "Now, my plan is for us two to draw off the pack on a false scent, and give these people time to make the ferry and get across to safety. Are you game?"

Little John gripped the woodman's hand in a joint-cracking grip, and the two, without a sign to Robin Hood, for fear he should refuse to let them go, dropped slowly to the rear and struck off in the direction from which the now increased shouts were approaching.

The two daring men pressed quickly forward, unslinging their bows as they went—for Wat o' the Woods, on the loss of his crossbow, had armed himself with the weapons of a fallen forester.

A short cut through bush and brier and tangle of bracken at last brought them to a point at which they knew they must intercept the oncoming foe.

The shouts drew nearer, and from the scattered cries it was plain that the Normans were aware of Robin Hood's flight, and were beating through the woods in the hopes of coming up with him before he could reach the ferry.

With the hasty resolve that each must fend for himself and do his best

to delay the advancing line by every possible means, Wat o' the Woods moved swiftly to the flank, and raised a wild war-shout which echoed through the woods.

"A Robin Hood! A Robin Hood! Sweet Liberty or Death!" roared Little John, catching up the ruse and making enough noise for ten.

A weird silence had fallen on the Norman band, for they had come to a halt in expectation of an attack.

The woods might be alive with reinforcements to Robin Hood's scattered band for all they could tell.

The momentary surprise turned almost to a panic when one of their horsemen inadvertently showing himself in an open glade, gave a horrible shriek and crashed from his saddle as a clothyard shaft from Wat's bow took him in the ribs.

Little John, too, began to ply his arrows with terrible effect, darting from point to point to give the appearance that a strong party of archers barred the advance.

For a few minutes the Normans held back irresolute.

The whirring arrows, which followed as sure as fate the exposure of head or limb above the covering bushes, deterred them.

But soon the hoarse shouts of their leaders could be heard driving them forward once more; and as Little John and his dauntless comrade fell back the Normans came on with renewed heart.

The sudden melting away of the apparently formidable attack soon convinced the leaders that this had been merely a bold ruse on the part of Robin Hood, and made them mad to overtake the fugitives.

Neither Little John nor Wat could do more than fall back sullenly from tree to bush, picking off with unerring aim the more venturesome of their pursuers.

At the fringe of the wood the land sloped away down to the green meadows of the valley, through which ran the silver ribbon of the Don.

With a last parting volley of arrows, the two dauntless foresters turned and ran down the hillside.

Scarcely three hundred yards from the river they could see Robin Hood's little flock pushing on across the lush-green water-meadows towards the point at which the great ferry-punt was moored. But their pace was cruelly slow, and even with the start they had gained Wat saw that the race would be desperately close.

Behind, an enraged howl from the foremost Normans announced that they, too, had sighted the quarry.

Turning every now and again to bring down another of their pursuers, Wat and Little John ran on, shouting to the little convoy to hasten.

But Robin Hood had already heard the savage cries of the hunt, and was urging the exhausted womenfolk on for the last desperate spurt.

On came the Normans, flushed with hopes of success.

Another hundred yards, and the fugitives would be cut off at the very goal.

Robin Hood's six archers notched shafts to their bow-strings and ran back a few paces.

The whizzing arrows stemmed the torrent of pursuit for an instant.

At last the ferry was reached, and Robin Hood, clasping Marian in his arms, leapt in, followed by Friar Tuck, who had seized the buxom Martha in his grasp, and floundered through the reeds to the side of the craft.

"Push off, master—push off! Leave us to hold the dogs back!" shouted their brave comrades on the bank.

Robin Hood, with full faith in their power to swim the river, and knowing that not an instant was to be spared if the defenceless women were to be saved from the Norman marksmen, seized the pole, and with one mighty effort sent the craft into mid-stream.

Nor was he a second too soon.

A flanking party of Normans, urged on by a knight in full armour, came floundering through the marshy margin of the river and despatched a hasty flight of arrows after the craft.

So closely did they fall that one stuck upright in the thwart on which Friar Tuck had seated his ample figure, to shield as far as possible the women who crouched behind.

Quite unperturbed, however, the friar seized his chief's bow and quiver, and as long as the Normans were within range made good practice with his shafts.

Indeed, a great shout of delight burst from him when he saw one of his arrows transfix the wrist of the mounted knight, causing the man to roll to and fro in his saddle and howl with pain.

A few sturdy strokes with the punt-pole soon forced the craft under shelter on the opposite bank, and Robin Hood turned to see what the lot of his faithful henchmen had been.

Two had fallen to rise no more; but the rest, with Little John and Wat o' the Woods, were grappling with the foe in hand-to-hand conflict, or slipping into the water to swim for their lives.

Wat unfortunately received a heavy blow on the head that half-stunned him, but Little John sprang to his rescue in the nick of time. Four of the nearest Normans went down before the giant's terrible blows, and then, with a shout of "Sweet Liberty or Death!" he seized Wat by the collar, plunged into the muddy waters, and struck out on his desperate swim for life.

The Normans crowded down to the water's edge, loosing shaft after shaft at the Saxon heads still bobbing in the stream, and raving at their own ill-luck.

The mounted men dashed hither and thither; up-stream and down, vainly attempting to find a ford by which they could cross.

Not until the last of the lads in green had reached the opposite bank and crawled to cover did the Normans cease their strenuous efforts.

Then a dropping shower of superbly-aimed arrows sent them packing over the meadows and back to the forest from which they had come.

For a space, at least, Robin Hood and those around him were safe. Some were wet to the skin, and, excepting the women, there was not one who did not bear some marks of the fierce struggle through which they had all passed.

Still, Wat o' the Woods, although he had been half-drowned in his passage

across the river in Little John's clutches, had scarcely regained his senses ere he was for pressing on.

"It is impossible to tell what devilry these relentless hounds may get up to," was his answer to the discontented murmurs of the weary fugitives. "Should they ford the stream and find us here, they would show us short shrift. Let us get on a mile or two, I say, and rest when we have found a secure place."

"Wat is right," affirmed the chief. "Come, Sweet Marian, it bleeds my heart to urge your weary limbs to march again; but there is no safety here. Forward, all!"

Once again they set out, Robin Hood stalking at Maid Marian's side, black rage in his heart and bitter sorrow on his brow. Behind him came the giant, with Wat o' the Woods and Friar Tuck, moody, silent, and worn out.

A mile slipped drearily away, and then the forest track entered a little glade, where the warm sunbeams played merrily.

A ruined cross and crumbled shrine stood a little way back from the path, and without a word the fugitives turned aside and knelt down before it, while their friar offered up a simple mass for the souls of the fallen, and an earnest prayer for the safety of those who had so far escaped injury or death.

Then striking still further into the untrodden forest they tramped on until Robin Hood gave the sign to halt.

A great fire was quickly set blazing, and the choice parts of a fat buck, which fell to the bow of one of the foresters, were soon grilled upon the embers and eaten in silence.

Then all lay down to sleep, except the chief and Wat, whose powers of endurance seemed to have no end.

"Woo is me, that I have lived to see this day!" groaned Robin, in the anguish of his soul. "At daybreak a hundred stout fellows to spring up at the winding of my bugle, and now of these, before the sun is set, six are all that are left to me."

"And am I not the seventh?" Wat said quietly.

"Of a surety, good comrade," Robin Hood cried, seizing the woodman's

great hand in his and wringing it warmly. "I scarce know how to express my gratitude for the brave work that you have done this day on our behalf."

"It is easily done, master," replied Wat warmly. "Take me into your band, give me a green doublet, and we will cry quits. Many of Robin Hood's men may lie stark and stiff in the forest, but many others have surely escaped and will yet join us. Besides, Robin Hood himself still lives, and where he is there will bold men gather to carry on the war 'gainst Norman tyranny. Come, sir, away with this gloominess. This quarter of England may be too hot to hold us, but I know a corner where the blue sea breaks, where caves in crags make snug dwellings for such as we. Thither will we go and gather strength for our revenge for this cruel massacre."

CHAPTER 4.

The Tragedy of Robin Hood's Bay.

THE happy month of June was almost ended. The sea lay like a sheet of hammered silver fringed with dazzling white where the wavelets rippled on the red shores of Robin Hood's Bay.

Hauled up on the beach were a few clumsy fishing-craft, marking the presence of a tiny hamlet hidden away in a cleft of the sandstone cliffs.

Here Robin Hood had taken up his quarters, after a weary march across weald and wold, and to him had come straggling in twos and threes, over a score of his old followers, who had escaped from the massacre or survived their wounds.

To his great delight, and Martha's frantic joy, Will Scarlet had also come in, tended by Much the Miller's son, who had nursed him through his grievous hurts, and brought him by easy stages to rejoin their chief's colours.

Of Allan-a-Dale and many another brave stalwart they knew nothing. Over thirty had shed their life-blood in defence of the camp; but the rest were unaccounted for.

There was some small grain of comfort in the fact that Sir Eustace Alleyne, Wilfred Wyke and the fair Hilda, and the Grey Knight had been absent on

various ventures, and so escaped the disaster.

Here in this wild corner of England's coast Robin Hood and his men had been living the lives of peaceful fishermen, for the handy foresters were quick to master the elements of sea-craft.

Wat o' the Woods, who had been born and brought up in these parts, found them ready pupils, and nothing gave him greater pleasure than to lead to the fishing grounds the little fleet of boats manned by these rough men, who were as merry as sandboys in their new surroundings.

But though peace reigned in that little cove, Robin Hood and his men had, nevertheless, to be always on their guard.

Scarcely five miles away, built upon an almost inaccessible crag jutting out into the sea, was the castle of a Norman baron, who ruled his country with fire and sword when the fit seized him.

Wat knew full well that should the news of Robin Hood's presence be brought to the ears of Sir Reginald Brasfer—or Ironarm, as his name reads in English—it would not be long before he would sally out and beat up the outlaws' quarters.

In consequence, bows and swords were always ready, and a guard was left over their quarters whenever the band went far afield in quest of sport.

Many days of immunity lulled their suspicions to rest, however, and the blow, when it fell, came with terrible force.

One day the little fleet set sail for an exploring expedition along the southern cliffs.

The foresters had gone armed, fortunately, as things turned out.

The sun had lately set behind the purple headlands and darkness was creeping over land and sea as the boats came sailing back. The breeze was warm, the sea like glass, and there was no sign of the horror which awaited the forester-fishermen in that little niche in the beetling cliffs.

The absence of the customary knot of watchers, ready to help in beaching the returning boats, set a chill creeping over the hearts of the mariners, and a

terrible dread seized them when they noticed a black pall of smoke ascending to the darkening sky.

On crept the boats, and all within them stood white, silent, and anxious, peering into the gloom ahead.

First one and then another boat grated on the shingle, and quickly the crews seized their arms, then ran forward and stopped, paralysed with fear.

A shout only wrung mocking echoes from the crags. Then a silence fell, and the night clouds seemed to come hastening in to watch the tragedy.

The men gathered round their chief, treading softly, as if fearing to break the eerie stillness.

A gull wheeling overhead screamed harshly.

"Forward!" Robin Hood exclaimed with a jerk.

His throat was dry and rigid with a nameless horror, and the word seemed to explode in his mouth. The seabird's cry had broken the spell.

With grinding, plunging strides, the foresters hastened up the belt of shingle, fitting arrows to their bowstrings as they ran. They did not rush blindly on, for their trained wits warned them that an ambush might await them. Soon they were proceeding at a cautious walk, spreading left and right as they beat their way towards the little group of huts.

The dull glow of smouldering timbers and fallen roofs told their tale only too well.

In vain the foresters searched hither and thither by the glare of brands lit at the embers. Not a living soul of the little garrison could be found. The dead body of a forester lay huddled on the narrow path at the cliff head; another could be dimly seen hanging in a thorn bush on the crag-side, where it had been flung headlong.

Throughout the search not a single word had come from Robin Hood's lips. His heart seemed to have turned to a stone within him, and his own men trembled as they watched that rigid, terrible face, ghastly white, even in the red light of the torch he carried, peering among the ruins seeking for the one he loved.

A square of parchment fluttered in the torchlight from an upright stake, and he plucked it down from the dagger which pinned it.

It was Marian's own jewelled blade, and he freed it tenderly and, kissing it, thrust it into his wallet.

The parchment had writing on it, and he read aloud:

"TO ROBIN HOOD.

"This for your skulking on my domain. Had you and your scum been in your lair when I came to burn you out, I would have served you as I served those whose bodies you will have seen. Seek not for your women, for I hold them in safe keeping, together with two of your pack, whose lives I have a brief use for. Read and take warning, for there is yet rope for your own hanging.

"REGINALD BRASFER."

There was a snarl of rage from the band as the last word was read, though Robin Hood betrayed no sign, but simply dropped the parchment into the glowing ruins, where it flared and shrivelled to a cinder.

"May that be the fate of this Norman murderer, for by the Heaven above and the souls of the dead, I swear to have revenge!"

He raised his sword-hilt to his lips and kissed it, and every man lifted his weapon to the starry sky and joined their vow with his.

Then Robin Hood turned, and with a last sweeping glance at the desolation around him, as if noting each horror so that his purpose might be the more complete, swung up on the cliff-path, followed by his silent men.

Onward they strode towards the north. The fresh sea breeze fanned their burning temples, but there were fires of hate burning within which vengeance alone could cool.

Mile after mile passed in silence, and then they paused at the cliff-edge and gazed across a moonlit strip of sea at a frowning battlement pile, from which a single light shone out like an open, watchful eye.

It was the castle of Baron Brasfer. Robin Hood sank down upon a boul-

der and gazed at that yellow spark like one in a trance. And his comrades crouched down behind, and, like true soldiers, drowned for a brief while the memory of their terrible homecoming in sleep.

Morning broke, and found Robin still seated there, and the great dark rings which encircled his flashing eyes told through what a terrible vigil his soul had passed.

Friar Tuck was first afoot, and sought to rouse his chief with words of hope, but all that Robin would utter was the word, "Revenge!"

But the instinct of the soldier told him that he and his men must not be discovered yet in the proximity of the castle, and so the command was given to "Rouse out!" and the band fell back silently into the shadow of the woods.

Here sentries were posted, and the foresters fell in on a scant breakfast of sea-fowl and dried fish, a supply of which they had brought with them.

Then a council of war was held.

Even with the addition of such fishermen of that coast who might be induced to aid them, Robin Hood could not now rely on more than forty men to back him; and the idea of such a small force attempting to take Brasfer's towering castle, with its sheer drop of a hundred and eighty feet from its battlements to the sea below, seemed preposterous.

But Robin Hood's presence alone was worth a hundred men.

"Know you aught of this castle, friend Wat?" asked Robin, after they had reviewed their possible strength. "Methinks it is like to prove a hard nut to crack, for it is strongly built and shrewdly placed, and short of siege I scarcely yet know how to come at it. Yet, by the rood! I will assuredly burst its gates, even if I wait twenty years to do it."

"I know this of it, that it is plaguey strong," Wat replied gloomily. "Many years ago, when I was but a slip of a lad, I went there with my father to take the old baron's toll of fish to the kitchens, and I remember remarking upon the strange thickness of the walls for a castle already defended on three sides

by the sea. A cleft in the rock fifteen feet wide and a hundred deep maybe, bounds it on the land side, and here is the gate. Though it is an easy leap for a man to clear the chasm, there is not enough footing for a goat on the other side, and above towers a wall of thirty feet at least."

"Humph! The task does not seem to promise well, unless we content ourselves to starve them out," Little John broke in.

"And that will be at Doomsday, methinks, so long as there are fish in the sea and they have a line to catch them," said the friar.

"Not so fast to your conclusions, friends, till I have said my say," Wat o' the Woods interrupted with a smile. "The present Castle of Brasfer was built by the first baron—whom may the saints rest, for, though a Norman, he was a just man, kind-hearted, and true to his bond as steel. Before him, so old folks said, there stood there an ancient, dismantled pile, built bit by bit by ancient races, until it must have been as strong a place as Brasfer's to-day.

"What was the story of the downfall? There were marks of fire and flame upon its ruined walls. Some had it that it had been smitten by a mighty thunderbolt from heaven in vengeance for the sins of its builders, and the tale went round that it was haunted by the ghosts of its miserable garrison, who at times roamed the crags and sent forth deep groans of agony which could be heard a league away. For as long as folks could tell, that crag was a spot to be shunned. Neither boat nor wayfarer ever approached within a bow-shot of it."

"And what is your opinion of its fate?" asked Robin Hood.

"If fire marks were on its stones, then I say that the fire was lit by man, and the place put to sack. Yet must it have been as impregnable almost as the present castle to-day. How was it stormed? you ask. Here we come to the groanings of the ghosts, and these I set down to the booming of the sea in caverns which doubtless honeycomb the cliff's foot, the noises only being heard at certain states of wind and tide."

"From your reasoning, then, I take it that you think that these caverns have some outlet within the castle walls, unknown to the garrison?" the chief asked, deeply interested in Wat's words

"Unknown or known, I think that it is probable that some shaft or chimney in the rock reaches to the castle, and by that shaft, doubtless, the ancient stronghold was stormed and won. Such shafts are common in these coasts, and methinks it would not be wasted time to reconnoitre the cliff-foot stealthily and see what we can find."

"A most excellent plan, I think, though it must be executed with caution and under cover of darkness. To-night, you, Wat, Will Scarlet, and I will sail into the cave in the smallest coble of our fleet and commence our task. Little John," Robin Hood went on, "I will leave you in command of the landward force to see that no one enters the castle or leaves it. Hide yourselves that your presence may not be guessed, for we would have the Norman wolf think that Robin Hood's heart has turned to wax, and that he has slunk off terrified at his braggart warning."

All that day Robin Hood slept, and the sentries crouched in the bracken at the edge of the woods and watched the castle gate. But the drawbridge was not lowered, nor the portcullis raised, for Sir Reginald Brasfer knew the character of the outlaw too well to give him any chance of revenge.

Occasionally the foresters could see a sentinel peering landwards, and from the keep a great standard fluttered in the wind, but beyond this there was not a sign of movement on the walls.

CHAPTER 5.

A Perilous Climb.

AT nightfall Robin Hood, now refreshed, summoned his two chosen comrades, and set out for their ruined homes.

A light and fast coble was selected from those upon the beach, and soon, under a patch of sail, the trio were scudding north before a gentle breeze towards their goal.

The night was calm but overcast, and

at a stone's-throw distance, cliff and rock merged with the sea into a vague blur of shadow. It was an ideal night for such a venture.

As they rounded the jagged point which marked the southern limit of the bay over which Brasfer's castle kept ward, Wat noiselessly let down the sail and unshipped the tiny mast.

It was advisable, he urged, to show as small a target on the ocean as possible, and, moreover, there was a strong current which would bear them inshore and carry them under the castle walls with scarce a stroke of an oar to aid them.

Slowly the little craft crept in under the shadow of the beetling cliffs.

The castle loomed large and mysterious above them, and again that single shaft of yellow light gleamed out and struck a rippling reflection from the waters.

Occasionally the echoing tread of watchmen on the ramparts and the clang of an impatient hoof in the castle stables was borne to their ears. Still their silent approach had not been discovered, and the boat stole into the impenetrable gloom beneath the castle crag.

Ready hands were thrust out to stave her timbers off the rocks, lest the noise of grating planks should reach the sentinels' ears.

From point to point the three outlaws made their way, eagerly scanning the face of the rock for a sign of an opening.

At one spot they could hear the hoarse murmur of water fretting in confined caverns, but the entrance must have been a full fathom below the surface.

With grim caution they made the circuit of the crag, but with no better success.

Only in one place was the solid, relentless front of sandstone broken, and then by but a deep rift or crack which extended as high as they could discern, but which only penetrated a foot or two into the rock. They clung to the spot nevertheless, for around it all to centre their last remaining hope.

Then, as if reading what was running in the minds of his companions, Wat o' the Woods stepped stealthily from the boat.

The crack in the cliff presented small difficulties to his trained limbs, for his youth had been spent among these crags.

Setting his back against one face of the rift, and his bare feet against the other, he proceeded to work his way upwards, raising himself first by his toes and then by his elbows in the fashion of a cragsman.

His progress was necessarily slow, for absolute silence was imperative, and a dislodged stone might lead to the discovery and ruin of their scheme.

Wat scarcely knew why he was making the ascent, except that he was determined to leave no stone unturned to aid his new chief, and after all this rift might lead to something.

It was a hopeless enough prospect, but he struggled on, though at every yard the crack grew narrower, and the work of ascent became more and more painful.

At last, to his intense relief, his elbow rested on a transverse ledge, and he hauled himself on to it and lay panting for a brief space.

As Wat clung to his precarious perch and stretched his aching limbs, he found, to his amazement, that one foot rested in an opening which, though scarcely big enough to admit a man, yet penetrated into the cliff.

With hope beating high, he struggled in, crawling on his stomach, so narrow was the aperture.

The passage widened a little, and he paused and listened.

A loud gurgling roar smote his ears, and he thought he detected a faint spray upon his cheek.

Here was a discovery, for at least he had gained an entrance to the subterranean caverns of the crag.

Worming his way backwards to the opening, he unwound a coil of strong, hard rope from his waist, where he had twined it with a true cragsman's instinct.

Fastening one end to a point of rock, he cautiously lowered it down the rift,

at the same time uttering the shrill cry of a seamew.

The call was so natural that Robin Hood and Will Scarlet scarcely heeded it, but the tapping of the rope on the cliff-face soon convinced them that it was a signal.

Securing the boat, they seized the rope, and, ascending hand over hand, soon reached the niche in which Wat was crouching. Hastily whispering the news of his discovery, the latter disappeared headforemost into the cavity, leaving his two comrades to follow.

Where the passage widened he struck a light with flint and steel, and soon had flaring a torch of tarred hemp, which he carefully shielded lest the light should be seen by any watcher from the sea.

The rhythmic roar of surging waters now removed the necessity for silence.

At last the crack ended sheer in a mighty pit, up which came spouting the yeasty spume of the imprisoned waves.

The three outlaws gazed down in awe upon the turmoil of the waters which flashed and glistened in the torchlight. There was no way to the castle there.

Upwards a vast chimney yawned above them, though how high it reached they could not tell.

A yard and a half to the right a narrow, knife-like ledge jutted from the face of the rock, but it seemed hopeless to attempt to reach it, even if it afforded a stepping-stone on their journey.

Wat waved the torch disconsolately, and scanned the ledge with hungry eyes.

No, it was not possible, and Heaven alone knew the horror of the death which awaited the man who tried and failed.

Then a ray of light fell upon a strange object which stuck from the rock within their reach.

Close examination proved that it was a spike of metal—doubtless thrust into a crack in the rock to afford a foothold so that the ledge might be gained.

An exclamation of delight burst simultaneously from their lips, for here it was plain that they had stumbled upon the path by which the ancient con-

querors of the castle had gained the summit.

Wat's theory of their attack bade fair to prove correct.

There was now no intention of turning back.

Wat quickly secured the rope around his waist, and Robin Hood and Will held on while he tested the foothold.

The metal was probably bronze, some spear-head, perhaps, of the nameless victors, for it showed no signs of rust or decay, and its hold was as firm as when first driven into the rock.

Cautiously the bold cragsman swung himself on to it, his fingers gripping a convenient ledge which ran above.

It was with a sigh of relief that the watchers saw him on the ledge beyond.

Cool and brave as the two foresters were, their hearts almost failed them when he called upon them to follow. But with tightly-closed teeth they grappled with the danger, and soon were on the other side and following their guide.

Here and there were difficult passages to negotiate, but everywhere were the spikes of metal set to guide them.

Up and still up, round and round the face of that awful pit they scrambled, scarcely heeding their cut and grazed limbs.

Then, to their delight, they saw an opening yawning black above them.

Wat pressed eagerly on.

Once his foot slipped in his haste, and for a minute he swung over eternity; but his iron nerve saved him, and he clung by tooth and nail until Robin Hood reached him and hauled him back on to the ledge.

"If ever you owed me anything you have repaid it a thousand times now," Wat gasped, gripping the chief's hand. "In faith! but my feet have almost lost their—"

The words died on his lips, for from above rang out a muffled sound which struck strangely in the booming chorus of the waves.

It was a hollow clang, and then the rattle of steel.

A flicker of light played in the black yawning entrance of the cleft, but it was not from their torch.

The three outlaws stood frozen with horror. They could hear voices, too, and the thud of approaching footsteps. In another minute they would be discovered.

With quick presence of mind Robin Hood rallied his scattered senses, and, plucking the flaming torch from the crevice into which it had rolled, flung it down to the seething tide below.

Round and round it spun, then the waters gulped it down with a hiss, and the cavern was plunged into pitchy darkness.

The flashes of light played in the black aperture above them, growing stronger as the sound of the approaching footsteps increased.

Robin Hood, Wat, and Scarlet shrank back beneath the overhanging face of the cliff, and scarcely dared to breathe. If the light of the torch should fall upon them, nothing could save them from discovery.

CHAPTER 6. A Forlorn Hope.

NEARER and louder rang the footsteps, and brighter grew the light.

Then appeared a man at the passage entrance. In his hand he held a flaming torch. He was thick-set, unkempt, and brutal-looking, and his garb was that of a retainer. From his belt hung a bunch of rusty keys. He turned aside and stood motionless with the torch held aloft, as if to light somebody's way.

Then came the clang of mailed boots upon the rock, and a figure clad in a gorgeous surtout of emblazoned silk, denoting his noble rank, swung proudly on to the platform of rock. He turned, and the strong light revealed to the watchers a face as cold and hard as the crags around him, and as cruel and relentless as the hungry waves beneath.

Still came the sound of footsteps, and as they, too, drew nearer, the pale grey eyes of the Norman gleamed tiger-like beneath the knitted brows.

A fair, girlish figure was thrust out of the passage mouth, and held, shuddering and drooping, in the grasp of two men-at-arms.

A low, hissing sound escaped from Robin Hood's lips, and he recoiled as if to spring; for in that shrinking form he had recognised his beloved Maid Marian.

A steady hand upon his shoulder brought him suddenly to his senses, and he shrank back against the cliff face with a nameless dread gripping at his heart.

For a full minute those beast-like eyes blazed down upon the girl, though never a muscle of the cruel face stirred, nor word parted those cruel, thin lips.

"Hark you, she-cat!" said the noble at last, in a harsh, repressed voice, as if choking back an all-consuming rage. "I have bandied words enough. Threats and promises alike have so far availed nothing. But, fool, you know not Brasfer's nature when you set your puny strength against his and think that he will take 'nay' in answer to his 'yea.' Think once again of what I offer you. You are here in my power, imprisoned within the strongest castle in the northern shires. The outlaw cut-throat whom you call lover has by this time called off his skulking pack and taken to his heels at my warning—"

Strength seemed to return to Maid Marian's trembling limbs in an instant at this imputation of cowardice against her idol, and she drew herself up like a queen and faced her bullying captor. Her lips curled with such contemptuous scorn that for a brief moment the pale grey eyes flinched.

"Confound you!" Brasfer hissed, with sudden, unveiled savagery. "Proud looks will not save you, jade. I have vowed by all the saints that you shall be wedded to me, and naught will bend me from my resolve. If you refuse, look down into this yawning pit, for this shall be your grave."

"Base coward!" Marian answered scornfully. "Perjurer of all your knightly oaths! Think you that the betrothed of the bravest man that ever trod England is of such poor stuff that she could hesitate between the choice of death, however terrible, and such a despicable cur as you? Wreak your black-hearted vengeance on me now. Come, I am ready!"

"Brave little woman!" said Robin Hood in his heart. "Oh, that I might clutch that carrion by the throat and fling him into this fearful abyss!" and again there came upon him the wild desire to hazard the terrible leap and rush to Marian's aid.

A loud burst of brutal laughter broke from the baron at the girl's spirited reply; but the rocks flung back the echoes with such hideous mockery that he started as if struck by a dead man's hand, and the laughter died upon his lips.

"Fool!" he hissed; "you know not what the death is. You shall see it with your own eyes! You shall watch the doomed go hurtling down, and hear his death-cry and the last plunge. Then, with his fate to fill your dreams, we shall see if you have not a different answer to my suit to-morrow."

Sir Reginald Brasfer now turned to one of the men-at-arms.

"Go drag hither one of those vermin that was taken yesterday! It were pity to waste good bread and water on such pests as they. Bind him and bring him here. Ah, you may blench, my pretty vixen! but you shall see that the word of Brasfer is as strong as his hate!"

In a few minutes one of Robin Hood's captured men was hurried on to the platform, trussed and bound, but with head erect and eyes flashing, prepared to meet the worst that was in store for him.

"So, varlet, you are to be compelled to do at least one useful deed in your life, after all," said the Norman, with bantering cruelty. "My lady, here, has been asked to choose between the death which lies before you and my hand in wedlock. Lest she should have but an imperfect idea of the conditions, I propose that you should undertake to show her the one and I the other. Yours is the death!"

The brave forester cast one look at Maid Marian, who had shrunk between her guards and crouched with eyes staring in speechless horror.

"Have no sorrow for me, fair mistress," he said calmly. "I die happily if my death can serve you one jot. But be assured that Brave Robin Hood will

never rest until he has washed out this foul crime thrice three times over with Norman blood!"

"Hurl the dog down!" roared Brasfer, stung to the quick by the man's superb bearing and scorn. "Seize him and fling him to the pit!"

"Nay, I need not your assistance. Back, you scum! Think you that Robin Hood's men need to be driven to their death? Watch how the outlaws of Sherwood can die!"

The men-at-arms fell back abashed. The forester cast one last pitying glance towards Marian, who now had sunk fainting to the ground. Then he leapt into mid-air and disappeared into the blackness beneath.

The men held their breaths and listened, but there was never a cry, only the booming of the waves.

Brasfer stood gazing down into the depths for one brief instant. Then he started back, raised his arm as if to brush aside some accusing spirit, and turning, strode blindly into the rock-hewn corridor, without casting a look to right or left.

The men-at-arms shrugged their shoulders, and raising the inanimate form of Maid Marian between them, stumbled heavily in his wake.

Then the torch-bearer, who all through the whole tragic scene had stood stern and immovable as stone, turned on his heel. The light of the torch flickered more faintly as he tramped stolidly up the passage. There was a mighty clang, as if a heavy door had been swung to, the jingle of keys, and then silence.

Robin and his comrades were left alone with the dead in the inky blackness.

How they made that perilous journey downwards none of them could tell.

Dazed, sick at heart, and trembling with horror at the cold-blooded murder of which they had been the helpless witnesses, they stumbled blindly on until Wat o' the Woods at last called a halt, and kindled a torch made from the rope which they carried.

Then they continued the descent, gaining at length the narrow outlet to the cliff, where they lay panting for a

while, drinking in the pure night air in great gasps.

The rope was made secure, the boat was reached, and soon the little craft was standing out to sea.

Not a word was spoken until the coble had rounded the foreland and was safe in the bay beyond. They had made their escape none too soon, for already the horizon was barred with pink, and the waves began to glow with the amethyst of early dawn.

They quickly found a sheltered niche in which to conceal the boat, and soon had her beached and drawn up in her hiding-place.

An arduous climb awaited them, but the sure-footed Wat led the way, and at last, after a stiff struggle, they gained the summit. Here a hoarse challenge saluted them from the early morning gloom.

"Sweet Liberty or Death!" replied Robin Hood; and at once half a dozen figures rose up from the misty shadows and ran to welcome them.

They were men of Little John's piquet, and soon the towering form of the giant himself could be seen striding towards them in the grey light.

"By the bones of my grandfathers! but I have spent the night in a sweat of anxiety for fear that I should never see you back again!" said he, as he gripped the hand of his chief. "Lights have been moving in the castle windows all night, and once I thought I heard a cry, though I tried to comfort myself that it was the piping of a gull. But how fared the venture?"

"Well!" replied Robin Hood, heavily. "But question us no more just now. I pray you, for we are like to drop with exhaustion. Lead on to the camp, and after a spell of sleep you shall hear all. Suffice it to say that Maid Marian so far is safe, though in desperate need of our help."

The camp was but a bowshot from the cliff, and in a few minutes Robin Hood, Wat, and Will Scarlet, having swallowed a bowl of steaming broth which Friar Tuck had ready for them, were wrapped in their cloaks and sleeping the sleep of the weary.

The sun had not been many hours

over the horizon when Robin Hood awoke and called his men around him.

Briefly but vividly he told them the adventures of the night—the discovery of the secret way, the terrible climb upwards, their surprise at the summit, Brasfer's brutal threat to Marian, and their comrade's heroic sacrifice.

The recital held them spellbound, and when their chief had finished he knew by the angry flame in every eye, and the grim, determined lines in their faces, that these men were staunch to the core, and could be relied on to brave any terrors for his sake.

"And now, comrades," he added, impressively, "I have told this gruesome tale plainly and without concealing any of the dangers through which we have gone, and through which we must go again if we are to rescue our kith and comrade from this villain's clutches. It is a right perilous adventure, and one only for brave hearts to attempt. Should any of you feel it is beyond your strength, I shall think no less of him if he takes not his place in the ranks of the volunteers that I am going to call upon now. All those who will join with me in this night's desperate rescue step forth."

Like one man the entire band ranged themselves at his side. Even the handful of fishermen who had thrown in their lot with Robin Hood during his stay among them were in the ranks of the forlorn hope.

"Lads, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this latest proof of loyalty to my leadership," said the outlaw chief. "The task before us is one of terrible difficulty, but I know you too well to think that there will be any turning back. The castle of Brasfer must be taken. It has fallen already in years gone by to one resolute foe, and it shall fall again, and this time to the brave men of Sherwood Forest, the terrors of all Norman tyrants."

A cheer went up from the gallant band at these last words, and caps were tossed so high in the sunlight that it was no wonder that the sentinels of the castle crowded forward on the ramparts, for the first time aware of Robin Hood's proximity.

A trumpet sounded faintly from the courtyard of the castle, and Robin Hood smiled grimly as he heard it.

"They have found us out at last, then," he said. "It had been better to have kept ourselves hidden, though this skulking has gone sore against the grain with all of us, I trow. I should dearly have loved to grant you a morning's archery at steel caps at long range, but time is too precious. We must back to our fleet and prepare to sail at sundown."

Leaving a small guard of archers to watch the castle gate, and give warning of any attempted sally on the part of the garrison, the outlaws made a wide detour to keep within the shelter of the woods, and reached the ruined fishing village at midday.

All the afternoon was busily occupied in fitting out the expedition.

Robin Hood decided that only a few should carry bows, the rest being equipped with axes slung from the shoulders, and swords from the belts, for the fighting, he knew, would mostly be at cut-and-thrust quarters.

"By St. Dunstan's tongs!" said Friar Tuck, ruefully, as the nature of the task for which he had volunteered began to present itself fully to him, "methinks a man of my peculiar build is ill-fitted for such a venture as this. How wide did the good Robin say is this fearsome path which leads upwards from the bottomless pit, Little John?"

"Scarce more than a hand's-breadth in its widest part," replied Little John, with a wink to the rest.

"What!" yelled the friar; "a hand's-breadth only, and I with a paunch that scarce an ell and a half of cloth will decently cover? I shall be dashed to pieces! By the rood, I can feel myself falling down—down! How many feet did you say the depth was?"

"No human eye could penetrate the abyss, Brother Tuck," Little John replied, melodramatically. "Only from the depths rolled up clouds of steam and spouts of boiling water from vasty caverns beneath."

"Faith, then, as a man of peace—but hold!—as a man of peace, why am I here amid all this horrid preparation for

bloodshed? By the rood! but I have an idea which may help us on our way. Ho! Robin Hood, a word with you!"

Drawing his chief apart, the two paced up and down beyond earshot of their comrades, the friar urging some point, and Robin Hood evidently dissuading him from his purpose.

But Friar Tuck would not take nay for an answer, and, turning to the cliff path, began to climb it rapidly.

The outlaws saw his portly figure outlined for a brief second against the already crimsoning sky. Then he waved an adieu and disappeared.

The work of coiling the long lengths of rope which were to aid the storming party in their climb, the preparations of the torches, and the loading of the boats went forward, but the friar did not return.

CHAPTER 7.

Friar Tuck in the Lion's Den.

WHEN Friar Tuck reached the summit of the cliff, he struck inland for a quarter of a mile, and then made his way northwards in a line with the sea.

Stepping along briskly, he was soon abreast of Brasfer's stronghold, and having struck the track leading to its gates he drew his cowl over his head to conceal his features, folded his fat hands in a meditative attitude, and set out at a solemn gait towards the castle.

As he appeared on the open space beyond the fosse, a lynx-eyed sentinel despaired him approaching in the gloom and challenged.

"Peace! peace!" cried Tuck, in a meek voice. "I am but a curtailed friar, who craves a night's lodging in this house. Open the gate, I pray thee, and earn a poor man's blessing."

"You'll find no lodging here," said the sentinel surly. "Sir Reginald Brasfer has no need for priests, except to bait them, so get you on your road while your skin is whole."

"By St. Dunstan! I would that I had you down here for a minute! I would have something to say to you on the subject of whole skins, Master Jackanapes!" growled Tuck, beneath his breath.

But it is the soft answer which turneth away wrath, and when he spoke again there was not a trace of resentment in his voice.

"Prithee, turn me not away. The night is already come upon me, and they tell me that the woods are infested with cutthroat outlaws, who have little respect for a brother of the church——"

"Who is that speaking without, fellow?" came in gruff tones from the parapet.

The sentinel turned to answer, and Friar Tuck, hoping that by good luck it might be Sir Reginald Brasier himself, kept on in the same meek and plaintive voice:

"In deed, as I came through the forest just now I saw two bands of villainous men, which Heaven in its mercy permitted me to pass undiscovered. Two powerful bands they were, and——"

"What was that you said? Out with it, Jack Priest, or by Heaven your supper shall be a crossbow quarrel!"

"Nay, threaten not a poor humble friar with violence. I do but crave a crust of bread and a bed of straw in your stables, noble sir."

"What was that you said about armed bands?" persisted the gruff voice. "Out with it or, priest or no priest, you die like a dog!"

"Nay. You make my blood run cold with horror at the thought," the friar went on in mock terror, wringing his hands and crying in his fright. "Do but let me in, and I will tell you all I saw. Have mercy, I beseech you, for now having revealed all, I dare not go back."

"Furies take him!" Tuck heard the vicious growl, and then he could scarcely restrain himself from skipping with joy, as the order was given for the drawbridge to be lowered.

"Stand ready, archers!" came the command. "Cover this whining fool, one of you, and at the first sign of treachery shoot him down!"

The great drawbridge dropped slowly down, and Friar Tuck lost no time in stepping nimbly across it.

In such a hurry were the guard to raise it against a possible rush, that he had scarcely set foot on it when it began

to move upwards, precipitating him down the slope and through the portcullis into the muddy courtyard, where he rolled over and over in pretended collapse from sheer terror.

His entry was greeted by the garrison with a loud guffaw, which, however, was cut short by the stern command to silence by the same gruff voice from the parapet.

"Kick the dog up, and see that he wipes himself down with straw; then bring him before me immediately."

Friar Tuck was quickly stood upon his feet and dragged unceremoniously into a stable, where a knot of boisterous men-at-arms poked fun at him while he cleaned as much mud off his frock as possible. But his face seemed to be as grimy as ever, in spite of his apparent efforts to remove the coat of dirt.

"Come, bestir yourself, Jack Priest!" said one at last. "Our orders are to take you before our master at once. If you cannot get the muck from off yourself with the straw, why, say the word, and we will carry you to the horse-trough."

"Peace—peace, oh man of sin!"

"Man o' sin! Hark to him! Marry, but you shall pay for that. Come hither, my witty shaveling," and the man-at-arms caught Friar Tuck by the ear and led him forth.

"Marry, my friend, but you shall pay for this, too, and that with a cracked skull," muttered Tuck to himself, though he submitted quietly enough.

After being hauled up a short flight of stairs, then along a passage and up a second stairway, he was bundled into a great chamber lit by the smoky light of torches, which flared from the wall-sockets.

At a massive bench-table sat Sir Reginald Brasier, and as he leant back on his stool and the torchlight fell upon his stern, cruel face, Tuck saw at once that here was a man upon which he might well have to exercise all his blandishments to save his own neck, to say nothing of the unfortunate prisoners to whose aid he had come.

The cold, stone-grey eyes seemed to bore the friar through and through as he was ushered toward unceremoni-

ously to the table. For a moment Tuck's wits almost deserted him under the mesmeric spell of those orbs; but he pulled himself together and murmured a professional "Pax Vobiscum."

"Your name and order," said the Norman coldly, ignoring the greeting.

"I am a poor brother of the Order of St. Dunstan. I am in Dingleydale as—"

"In Dingleydale? What do you so far afield?"

"Noble sir, I am on a pilgrimage which it is my custom to make every five years to the shrine of my patron at Deepwold."

The friar prayed inwardly that Heaven would forgive him for the lies he was compelled to tell.

"Deepwold?" said the Norman, raising his eyebrows curiously. "I know not the place. In what quarter does it lie?"

"Nigh unto York, noble sir," replied Friar Tuck. "It came about that I departed from the track to render spiritual solace to a sick man, and so lost my way and wandered to the east until—"

"You say the wood is full of armed men?" interrupted Brasfer sharply.

"Yea, verily—base fellows armed with bow and bill," Friar Tuck replied, warming to his task, for it was his plan to keep the Norman's attention fully occupied with imaginary foes on the land, so that those on the sea might have a fairer opportunity. "Two bands I saw bivouacing in the forest, each of four-score men, so far as a poor man of peace, unskilled in armies, might come to reckon. At sight of them I crept away, and skirting their outposts, got round unseen."

The baron gave an exclamation of annoyance, but Tuck went on describing the positions of the imaginary picquets, and added a vast deal of information of such a convincing nature that even the astute Brasfer was completely hoodwinked.

"Perdition take the knaves!" exploded the Norman suddenly. "It seems that I have drawn a veritable hornets' nest about my ears."

"But, noble sir, it does not surely

mean that these base outlaws are arraying themselves against one so powerful as you?" asked Friar Tuck in well simulated surprise.

"What else does it mean, fool?" roared Brasfer viciously. "Think you that they band themselves together and lie in the forest for holiday? The cursed rabble are led by the outlaw, Robin Hood, whom I swear by the saints to hang the moment I lay hands on him!"

"But this castle is strong, and surely there is naught to fear?" said the friar meekly, though he could scarcely keep from laughing.

"Fear? Dog of a priest! Think you that Brasfer is afraid? The scurvy pack may lie till they rot in the forest, but I will not give my captive up. Confound her! Either she yields or tonight she dies!"

And the Norman, beside himself with passion, rose from his stool and paced up and down the apartment like a caged beast. Then remembering Tuck's presence, and realising that his rage had surprised him into an admission which he had had no intention of making to a vagrant priest, he stopped dead and fixed his baleful eyes full upon the friar as if reading the effect it had produced in his mind.

But Friar Tuck did not stir a muscle.

"I said—her!" hissed Brasfer, as if dissatisfied with the impassive humility of the priest.

"I heard you, noble sir," replied Tuck sadly. "Alas! that a woman should be the cause of such strife!" and he rolled up his eyes and sighed ponderously.

There was a pause, in which Friar Tuck scanned the pale face furtively from under his cowl. His first intention, to fill the garrison with false alarms about the strength of the foes and their probable attack had been fulfilled. Was it possible for him now, without awaking any suspicion, to gain admittance to Marian's presence and apprise her of the help at hand?

"Perhaps, gallant sir, the services of a holy man at such a crisis might not be amiss," he added cautiously.

Brasfer pricked up his ears and shot a questioning glance.

"I mean," pursued Tuck, "that if I could but see the maid, and, perhaps, reason with her, my help might be of some avail in averting this impending bloodshed."

The Norman took a few strides, as if pondering the matter; then he stopped.

"So be it! If your counsels succeed, there will be gold for you. But mark you, if you play me false, or set the wench against me, then look for a short shrift and a long rope, for by the gods your fat carcase shall dangle from the battlements for your treachery! Away with you to the buttery and eat your fill. In an hour present yourself here in this chamber."

Friar Tuck could scarcely contain himself for joy as the heavy curtain swung behind him, and he found himself free to relax his features from their unaccustomed mournfulness.

"Now for a feast of the best in the castle kitchens," he murmured, "for beshrew me, with such a tax upon my nerves as is to come, I must needs build up my all too delicate body," and he chuckled so loudly that his own voice made him quake with apprehension; and so, with folded hands, he walked deliberately to where the cooks and scullions, were busily at work among the remnants of the evening meal.

"Pax vobiscum," he said, in a hollow voice, as he entered the great kitchen and seated himself at the table.

The advent of a friar among them was such a rare occurrence that the whole gathering was struck dumb for the moment. But as Tuck unconcernedly picked up a knife and began to cut great slices of juicy meat, which he proceeded to devour with quite a worldly appetite, the company gradually began to thaw towards him, and soon whole volleys of good-natured chaff were flying across the table at his expense.

"Another haunch of mutton for the reverend father," said one. "By my grandmother's grey mare but he tucks enough food under that girdle of his to last a month of fasting!" added another.

But Friar Tuck spoke never a word, for in that motley crew he had suddenly recognised the face of a man who knew

him not only as a curtal friar, but as the fighting priest of Robin Hood's band also.

Nor was it long before his anxious glances from under the close-drawn cowl convinced him that this man's suspicions had been awakened.

Friar Tuck remembered him well, for he himself had knocked him off his horse in a skirmish, which ended in the capture of a certain prior, his entire retinue, and, what was of more value, a bag containing a thousand crowns, the moneys of an abbey against which Robin Hood had a long-standing grudge.

Tuck knew also that this man had cause to remember him, for he had to trounce him soundly before he would yield, and when he was ultimately set at liberty with the rest of the prior's servants he vowed that he would get even with his frocked captor if chance ever threw him in his way again.

Chance had been kind to him, and his opportunity for paying off old scores had come with a vengeance.

Nevertheless, in spite of his fears, Friar Tuck went on eating with the best grace possible.

He could see that his every movement was closely watched by his enemy. If he were not compelled to speak, he might evade the other's suspicions, but, on the other hand, his studied silence was already beginning to provoke hostile gibes from his companions at the tables.

"Come, friar, it is scarcely courtesy to sit down at our table and eat of our meat without so much as a blessing," said one fellow at last, who, by his blustering manner and his position at the table, Tuck set down as a chief among the cooks.

"Pax vobiscum," mumbled Tuck desperately, and went on eating.

"A blight on your Latin!" fumed the cook pompously. "We speak here but in the language of our race, and if you care not to be civil, then, by my faith, out you go!"

Things were getting critical, and Tuck made up his mind to beat a retreat. So, rising from the table, he made for the door. His enemy also

started to his feet, but the friar gained the passage before him and hastened along, wondering how he was to extricate himself from this unexpected fix.

A footstep in pursuit made him pause, and he stepped aside swiftly into a recess.

The footsteps came nearer, and as the man drew abreast of his hiding-place, Tuck, scarcely knowing what he did, flung himself upon him and gripped him by the throat.

So sudden was the attack, and so vice-like the clutch, that the man never uttered a sound. A look of wild terror distorted his face. His eyes seemed to start from his head, but Tuck's muscles never slackened their relentless hold. It was necessary that this man should be silenced, otherwise the friar would be surely foiled.

The wretched man struggled desperately for a few seconds, then his body grew limp, his legs collapsed beneath him, and he sank apparently lifeless to the stone floor.

Swiftly Tuck dragged the body into the recess and covered it with a sack he found there. Then he pulled his cowl closely over his face, and with chin on his breast, moved solemnly on.

A few moments later other footsteps sounded behind and hurried up to him.

"Marry, Sir Priest, but for one so well favoured in the flesh you sit not long at the platter," said the rough voice of Sir Reginald Brasfer. "Still, an you would try your persuasive powers upon this she-cat of the woods, follow me. She knows the conditions I impose. Either she becomes mine, or to-night she meets a fate which she has full knowledge of."

Brasfer turned and retraced his steps, followed closely by Tuck who braced his nerves for the ordeal yet to come.

What if Marian's surprise at seeing his familiar figure should betray her into giving some sign? That would mean death for him, at least. Still, there was no turning back now.

The Norman led the way up many a steep stair, until the friar began to realise that they must be mounting to the keep, perhaps to that very chamber from which that single light had twice

kept ceaseless vigil through the long night.

At last a short passage brought them to a door fitted with a ponderous lock and studded with iron bolts.

A key which hung from Brasfer's girdle was fitted to it, and the door was flung open. The Norman swung aside a heavy curtain and entered, but Tuck hung back, shrinking from the test.

A short, quick cry, which Tuck recognised as Marian's, greeted the Norman.

"Murderer!" she exclaimed. "Can you not leave me to spend my last few hours in peace?"

"Mad fool! Think well of what awaits you if you refuse my request. Riches, position, everything I can command could be yours! Will nothing move you?"

"Nothing!" the girl replied simply, and there was a ring of terrible determination in her voice.

Then prepare yourself for your doom. Here I have brought a holy father whose consolations may comfort you if you still persist in your mad resolve, but whose counsels may move you to a wiser mood."

Friar Tuck, with cowl drawn down more deeply, and his courage screwed to the sticking point, now paced slowly into the room.

Marian's wide-staring eyes seemed to dilate almost imperceptibly for a second, but otherwise she betrayed no sign. Only a little choking cry escaped from Martha, whom Friar Tuck saw crouching behind her mistress in an attitude of hopeless despair.

But Brasfer, if he suspected anything, noticed nothing to confirm his suspicions, and with a mocking bow, he withdrew, clanging the door behind him and turning the key in the lock.

Marian would have thrown herself into the good friar's arms at once had not he held up a finger in warning, and thus the three stood motionless until the receding footsteps in the corridor without told them that all danger of eavesdropping was past.

A swift examination of the arras satisfied Tuck that no spies were lurking near, while the solid stone masonry assured him that the likelihood of a

secret passage and a spy-hole in the walls was remote.

Not until he had made certain of all these points did he fling back his cowl and take the girl into his fatherly arms.

After the first greetings and the questions of the two fair captives concerning the welfare of their lovers had been satisfactorily answered, Friar Tuck went on to tell them of the plans for the attack on the castle, and the venturesome climb of Robin Hood and his two brave comrades the day previously.

"Then Robin was actually near me during that terrible scene of yesterday?" Marian cried. "Oh, had I but known! I would have been braver then."

"Nay, lass; had you known, everything might have been lost. A cry, or even a startled look, might have cost three gallant men their lives. As for courage, why, you are the bravest lass in Christendom, and Martha here is the next. Come, cheer up, my pretty doves, for while there is a breath left in this fat body not a hair of your bonny heads shall be harmed."

"But to-night this dastard knight demands my answer, and then I am to be flung into the pit."

"Give him his answer, brave lass. There can be but one. Trust me that I shall be at your side, and if our plans happen to go amiss, which Heaven grant they may not do, I promise you that the first to go to his doom shall be Sir Reginald Brasfer."

CHAPTER 8.

Thrills and Terrors.

MEANTIME, at the cove the work of the expedition had gone briskly forward, and when the last flush of red had died out of the western sky, and the black clouds of night came rolling in from the sea, everything was ready for the start.

Summoning his band around him, Robin Hood explained for the last time every detail of his scheme. Absolute silence was to be maintained by every soul. He, with Will Scarlet, was to lead the way in the perilous climb once Wat o' the Woods had got the rope in

position; after that Wat was to guide the rest in the difficult places.

Again Robin Hood called upon any man who felt unequal to the task to fall out and think no shame of himself for doing so.

Not a man stirred.

One by one each boat was filled with men and launched into the gentle sea.

Sails were hoisted, and a course shaped for Brasfer Castle crag under the pilotage of Wat, who himself held the tiller of the leading boat.

So dark was the night that it was a wonder that one or more of the boats did not lose touch and drift apart from the fleet; but fortune favoured them from the start, and when at the seagull's cry, which was the prearranged signal, every sail was lowered, the tiny flotilla lay like a flock of sea-fowl drifting with the tide into the sweep of the bay, and so under the shadow of the castle itself to the foot of the crag.

Here, with absolute silence, each boat's crew laid hold of the jagged rocks and waited their turn to approach the rift in the cliff at which they were to disembark and commence their desperate climb.

Wat o' the Woods was the first to set foot on the rock, and within three minutes the descending rope gave the signal for Robin Hood and the rest to follow.

Each boat was carefully moored as soon as it was emptied, and pushed out to make room for those that were to come after.

Fortunately the roaring of the waves within the submerged caves was sufficient to drown the noise of any chance mishap, and boat after boat was successfully emptied of its freight, and the men, armed with axe, sword, and torch, and with coils of rope wound round their waists in case of need, disappeared one by one up the dangling rope to the cave-mouth above.

Five-and-thirty men in all comprised the forlorn hope.

Robin Hood and Will Scarlet had already accomplished half the climb, and hung like cats far above the yeasty surges of the spouting waves, making fast cords where they could be of most

use in helping on the less experienced climbers behind.

One unfortunate man lost his hold and plunged headlong to his death, and his fearful scream so paralysed the rest with awe that for some moments they clung helpless to the cliff face, afraid to move a limb.

But as the path mounted higher, so the progress became easier.

Robin Hood by this time had reached the rocky platform at the entrance to the passage, and here he was quickly joined by Will Scarlet, who sank panting at his side, almost overcome with exhaustion and the nervous strain through which he had passed.

Little John was the next to reach the ledge, and Robin Hood lent a helping hand to pull the breathless giant to a place of safety.

One by one heads and shoulders began to appear, whose owners were quickly dragged up by their brawny comrades.

Looking down, Robin Hood gazed with awe upon the strange spectacle beneath him.

The wall of the great circular pit was lit by a score of flaring torches, which waved and flickered as the climbers moved wearily upward.

A hundred feet beneath churned the ceaseless waves, flung hither and thither like shapeless, tortured things by the onrush of the advancing tide.

But the hours slipped on, and if Brasser was to keep his threat and Friar Tuck's mission prove successful, then the critical moment could not be far distant.

Leaving the rest to follow as best they could, Robin Hood marshalled his force in the rock corridor, and himself, with Little John at his side, took post by the bolt-studded door which barred their way.

Minutes seemed like hours.

From below came the ceaseless booming of the waves, but not a sound could be heard within the castle.

The last climber had reached the platform, and a solitary torch remained lit to guide the rearmost in the desperate rush which was to follow the opening of the gate.

Still there were no welcome footsteps to relieve the pent-up agony of doubt.

Robin Hood had determined, if no better opportunity offorded, to batter the door from its hinges with axes. But this was only the last resort, for he knew the studded timbers would not yield before the whole castle was aroused and the way barred by armed men. Then, except for the desperate ferocity of the attack, the chances of success would be almost hopeless.

At last a faint footstep sent a thrill of expectation through the waiting force.

The footsteps grew nearer and more distinct. Then the jingle of keys could be heard, and they knew that the supreme moment had arrived. Every hand sought the hilt of his weapon, and every arm was loosed for the first blow.

* * * *

Meanwhile, high up in the castle keep, Marian, Martha, and Friar Tuck waited with tense anxiety for the first sound of footsteps which was to herald the last act in this strange drama.

Of the other yeoman who had been taken prisoner Friar Tuck could learn nothing.

Maid Marian only knew that the two survivors of the guard had been dragged with them at the stirrup-leather of a man-at-arms to the castle yard; but there they had lost sight of them, for Martha and she had been at once hurried to their present prison chamber.

The weary moments dragged slowly on, and Friar Tuck, with feigned light-heartedness, did his best to sustain the flickering hopes which his appearance had kindled in the hearts of the overwrought women.

At last the ceaseless watching and the nervous strain of the past two days began to demand of Marian their toll in sleep.

Friar Tuck picked her up like a child and gently carried her to a curtained recess, where he left her, with the faithful Martha at her side.

"Heaven be thanked for granting her this brief respite from her troubles!" he murmured, devoutly; and then,

sinking heavily upon a stool at the table, he buried his bullet head in his big hands and fell to wondering what was to be the upshot of this anxious time, and whether the dawning of the new day would find him among the conquerors of the castle or dangling by his neck from the ramparts as a spy discovered in the camp.

He recalled with a shudder his recent struggle with the would-be betrayer, the lifeless body which he had placed in the recess, and so scantily concealed under the sack.

What if the corpse should be discovered? There would be no doubts in the minds of the retainers as to the murderer, for they would remember that when the friar had left the kitchens this man had followed on his heels. Then what would happen?

Friar Tuck pictured himself seized and dragged before Sir Reginald. He could see his gabbling accusers, the stern, cruel face of the Norman searching him through and through. What then?

"Heigho!" he sighed at last. "Well, I have been in tight places before, and always managed to squeeze my carcase through. I can only hope that good luck will not desert me. But, first, the women must be saved, and methinks it were best to provide myself with some weapon. If I but had my faithful quarter-staff here at my side, I might account for a couple of heads at least in the tussle. But wait! I see iron bars on yonder window, and an iron bar is a handy thing at close quarters."

Hastily mounting a stool, for the window stood above a man's height, Tuck tested each bar in turn, and found to his delight that one gave a little in the socket. By dint of strenuous effort he soon had it loosened, and then flinging all his ponderous weight on to it he tore it from its leaden setting.

"A right handy cudgel," he said, balancing it in the palm of his hand and giving it a twirl and a flourish as if it were an oaken stick. "A beautiful stave; and now, Sir Ironarm, even if your head be as hard as your heart, and a steel casque cover it, I warrant that

with a fair opening I will crack it as cleanly and smartly as a filbert!"

The friar sprang on guard against an imaginary adversary, making one or two lightning feints and cuts; and then, apparently satisfied with the weapon, he thrust it into a capacious pocket in his frock and sat down again to wait.

At last Tuck's straining ears detected footsteps in the passage without. He drew his cowl over his bullet-head and folded his hands before him on the table, as if in deep meditation.

The door was unlocked with eager fingers and flung open.

Maid Marian sprang from her sleep in terror at the rush of armed men, who surged into the apartment. But they seemed not to notice her.

It was Friar Tuck that they seized. They dragged him from his stool and set him on his feet. Then one man, stepping forward, flung the cowl back from his face.

"Ha, ha! What did I say? It is the hedge-priest of Sherwood, Friar Tuck, who has thrust his head into the lion's jaws!"

The harsh, vicious voice made the friar start almost from his skin, for it was that of the man whose body he had pictured lying stark and stiff in the passage below!

He had indeed returned to life, though his neck was purple from the terrible grip of the priest's strong fingers, and his eyes seemed still to be bulging from their sockets, like the eyes of a throttled man.

"Ah, you may well flinch, you slinking spy!" he croaked, nursing his bruised throat as if each word racked him with agony. "You leapt upon me like a dog in the dark, but you bungled the job, nevertheless. I vowed once before to have my revenge, but now I vow it ten times over, and will never rest until I see your carcase pecked to shreds by the ravens."

The guards had hustled the priest from the chamber, and by this time were dragging him unceremoniously down the staircase; but the man still followed, howling threats after him, and scarcely pausing to draw breath in the frenzy of his spleen.

Sir Reginald Brasfer was seated in the chamber to which Friar Tuck had first been ushered. His face was twitching with suppressed fury, and his hands opened and closed upon the arms of the oaken chair as if the fingers were clutching at an enemy's throat.

The audacity of Friar Tuck's entry into his stronghold as a spy had not only enraged the Norman almost beyond self-control, but his passion was tinged and made more terrible by an element of fear. If this vagrant priest could risk his neck to penetrate to the aid of his captive companions, what would not Robin Hood attempt—ay, and accomplish—to win back his sweetheart?

Friar Tuck saw no sign of mercy in Brasfer's face as he was thrust forward to the table.

On either side a man-at-arms pinioned him by collar and wrist, and behind were men with pikes. But Tuck, even in face of these odds, could not help longing for a lucky moment when he might seize his concealed bar of iron and make one struggle at least for life.

"Well, has this varlet been identified?" Brasfer asked, leaning forward and scanning the friar's countenance fiercely.

"Ay, noble sir," croaked the accuser, stepping forward. "I recognise and denounce him as the outlaw hedge-priest, Friar Tuck, of Robin Hood's band. He it was who made me prisoner when the worshipful Prior of Aylmer, with his retinue and treasure-chest, were ambushed and captured by the cutthroat crew. I recognised his figure, in spite of his cowl, when he sat at meat with us in the kitchen; and when I followed him to make certain of my suspicions before hastening to you, gallant sir, he waylaid and throttled me, leaving me smothered beneath some sacks for dead."

"How now, knave?" thundered Brasfer, turning to Friar Tuck. "What answer have you to these charges?"

"An excellent answer," replied Tuck with calm effrontery. "What this young cockerel with his neck half-wrung has said is perfectly true. I am Friar Tuck, the fighting priest of Robin Hood's

band, a title I am prepared to uphold if these men here will but release my arms for an instant."

"Insolent dog! Have a care, or your tongue shall be rooted out with red-hot pincers!"

"Most excellent justice, and truly Norman," retorted Tuck. "You ask a question, and next threaten me with penalties for using my tongue in answering it."

Brasfer snatched a mailed glove from the table and flung it in the friar's face. A thin trickle of blood from the lips showed where it had struck. But Tuck did not flinch; only his blue eyes blazed more brightly, and his great limbs swayed, as if he would shake off his guards and leap upon the perpetrator of the cowardly act.

"And this cock-and-bull story of the outlaw bands in the forest—I suppose that is a lie?" Brasfer asked, at last.

"That you must decide for yourself," the friar replied coldly.

"By the thunder of Jove, but you shall suffer for this insolence!" roared the Norman, bringing his fist down with a crash upon the table. "I threatened you with hanging if I found aught savouring of treachery about you, but now methinks hanging were too easy a death. We have a shorter shrift for such outlaw scum as you. Away with him, guards, until the morrow!"

The men-at-arms began to drag the captive from the chamber, but this respite from death was not at all to Friar Tuck's liking. He guessed from Brasfer's words that his fate was to be the pit, and, if so, it would be a help to Robin Hood and his companions if he could secure that the sentence should be carried out that night.

By this time he was certain that Robin Hood and his men must be in waiting beyond the great door beneath the castle. If this were opened to admit him only, while Maid Marian and Martha were left safe in their tower chamber, so much less the chance of their coming to harm in the struggle.

No sooner had Tuck arranged all these pros and cons swiftly before his mind than he decided to make a fight for it.

With a desperate wrench he flung one

arm free and swung the fist with such a mighty buffet into the face of the second guard that he released his grip and reeled back blinded by the blow.

Then in a trice the friar was flourishing his iron bar over his head and striking right and left at all who offered to close with him.

"Seize him, you cowards! Strike him down!" shouted Brasfer, leaping to his feet and drawing his sword.

The men-at-arms, recovering from their first shock, and anxious to distinguish themselves in their master's presence rushed to grips. One went down with a cracked skull, but then, strangely enough, the terrible length of iron seemed to fly from Tuck's grasp, and he stood disarmed and passive, a quiet smile upon his lips.

"To the pit with the spy! He shall die to-night!" thundered the Norman, as soon as the priest had been seized and a cord passed round his arms for better security. "Fling him down, and let him mumble his last prayers in mid-air!"

If Tuck's escort had been unceremonious before, they were more than brutal now, and he was kicked and prodded forward with pike-points until his whole body seemed one vast bruise, and the breath was all knocked out of him.

Down, and still down, they drove him, and an inclined passage was reached at last that took them towards a ponderous door, revealed by the torch held aloft by the gaoler, who led the way.

Now was the critical moment.

Friar Tuck pulled his scattered wits around him, drew a mighty breath, and cried:

"Sweet Liberty or Death!"

CHAPTER 9.

Victory and Revenge!

This shout was greeted with jeers by his guards, who saw in the battle-cry only the bravado of a condemned man going to meet his fate. They little realised that pent-up avalanche of revenge which was to be released at the opening of that door and crush them in its path.

The gaoler stumbled clumsily among

his keys, but the right one was found at last and fitted to the lock.

The sound of the rusty bolts shooting back from their sockets sent a thrill of expectation through Tuck's veins, and he ground his teeth to think that his arms were bound, and that he should be helpless in the coming struggle. Then a horrible dread seized him that perhaps something had gone amiss and his comrades were not there.

But all doubt was set at rest by the sudden yell which greeted the opening of the ponderous gate.

A wild, confused mass of Lincoln green and flashing steel burst from the gloom beyond. The gaoler went down with the first stroke of Robin Hood's sword.

One of Friar Tuck's guards dropped with his head broken by a blow from Little John's axe. The other fell without a groan, pierced to the heart.

Nor had the men behind time to escape from the tide of revenge which had overwhelmed them. Though they dashed madly up the steps, shouting wildly the alarm, the agile foresters quickly overtook them and struck them down.

The surprise was as successful as it was sudden. Such of the garrison as were not upon the ramparts were scattered over the castle, some asleep, others playing cards or drinking.

Brasfer, on hearing the noise of the conflict, sprang to his feet in a cold sweat of apprehension, and, hastily buckling on his sword and seizing his shield, hurried out to learn the cause of the turmoil.

He was met by a pack of panic-stricken scullions flying for their lives and crying out that the castle was taken. Thrusting these furiously from his path, he sprang down to the courtyard beneath, shouting to the garrison to rally to his side.

But even he realised that the day was almost lost, for green-clad figures were flitting from point to post at every turn, and already the clash of arms came from the battlements.

A grey-goose shaft, which splintered on his shield, roused his scattered senses, and with a cry of "A Brasfer

Follow me!" he rallied the remnant of his garrison and headed for the keep.

If Friar Tuck been able to get his arms free, or even to make himself heard in the turmoil of the first rush, the struggle might have been ended and the castle taken in a brief five minutes.

But he had been flung down and unmercifully trampled on, unrecognised by the foresters, who, coming from the darkness into light, were so dazed that they could not recognise friend from foe.

When he regained his senses he found himself alone, with only the light of a torch sputtering upon the pavement to comfort him.

The axe of one of the dead Normans, however, lay at his side, and setting his bonds against the edge of this he soon had his hands free. Then he arose stiffly to his feet and clambered up the stairs.

Meantime Robin Hood had been dashing hither and thither, at first directing the attack, and then, when he saw that the castle was as good as theirs, setting out in search of Maid Marian.

"Where is Friar Tuck?" he cried anxiously. "It was his voice that shouted our battle-cry, I'm certain. Two of you go and search for him in the passages beneath, lest he should have come to any harm."

The two foresters who had been dispatched upon this errand found the friar painfully mounting the steps, and soon ushered him into Robin's presence.

"Hail, best of brave fellows!" cried his chief, coming forward to meet him and clasping his hand warmly. "Right well have you performed your task, although I know not by what means you compassed the opening of the door. But, tell me, have you seen Maid Marian yet?"

"And Martha, too?" chimed in Will Scarlet breathlessly.

"Yes; I have seen them both," panted the friar ruefully, rubbing his bruised anatomy. "It is not an hour since I was with them in their prison chamber within the castle keep."

"The castle keep?" cried Robin Hood eagerly. "Ho, there! to the keep, my merry men! Follow, good friar, as best

you may, for there will be work to be done ere we win my lady's chamber. On, lads, on! Sweet Liberty or Death!"

The battle-cry was taken up by the band, who had rallied to Robin's side, and in a minute the narrow stairway which led to the castle keep was gained.

But Brasfer was not prepared to yield his last hope of success, and, in fact, of life, too cheaply.

The stairway was so contructed that it was impossible for two men to advance abreast and yet use their weapons, while a sharp turn in the passage gave an excellent point of vantage for a defending force.

Here it was that Brasfer and a few picked men had posted themselves with sword and axe, determined to sell their lives dearly.

An impetuous young forester, who leaped past Robin Hood in his eager haste to be first into the building, paid for his recklessness with his life, for at the corner a dozen blades were waiting to receive his body.

Warned by his downfall, Robin Hood bore back, and with difficulty stemmed the torrent of the attack, which was sweeping him on to certain death.

The turn in the narrow passage was so cunningly devised that arrows were of no avail, while to rush it would be almost impossible, for the bodies of the foremost must rapidly choke up the entrance.

To make matters worse, two arrow slits which commanded the stairway were now manned by Norman cross-bowmen, who enfiladed the foresters with their bolts.

Seeing that it was useless to keep the men there in so dangerous and hopeless a position, Robin Hood shouted to them to fall back and gain shelter.

"Beware! They are heaving down stones from above!" came a shout from the rearmost men.

There was a desperate scramble to escape from the narrow death-trap: but the Normans were too quick for two poor fellows. A great pinnacle of stone, torn from its setting on the battlement above, came hurtling down, crushing them to death.

Robin Hood had scarcely time to

spring back into the sheltering doorway to escape the falling mass; and here he found himself alone, his escape cut off by the block of stone which choked the stairway, and the knowledge that beyond that dark corner were a score of desperate foes.

Pressing close to the wall, he crouched low and waited in absolute silence.

A dark visage peered round the angle, and, seeing the mass of stone below and the apparently empty passage, the man shouted to his comrades:

"They are gone. The dogs have turned back, and the door is blocked with a mass of masonry from above."

Robin Hood sank on his face at these words and lay as if dead.

The next moment Brasfer stepped into the passage, and, treading carelessly over the bodies of the slain, examined the barrier formed by the pinnacle of stone.

"It will suffice for a time," the outlaw chief heard him say. "Two of the best swordsmen among you remain here and hold the angles against surprise; the rest seize your crossbows and follow me."

Robin's heart gave a bound, for the fates were indeed fighting with him. He heard the gathering of the men and the steady tramp of their feet up the stairway of the keep.

From the courtyard beneath he could catch the sound of Little John's gruff tones rallying the foresters, and the voice of Will Scarlet directing the aim of the archers.

From beyond the angle came the rough voices of the two men still on guard. It was evident they did not relish the job, for the passage was dark, and they had no mind to be left alone with dead men.

One of them stepped forth and strode down the short flight of stairs to the narrow archway and stood surveying the courtyard through the narrow space left at the top of the fallen block of stone.

Robin Hood watched him furtively. Should he rush the angle and slay the man beyond and then return to cut down this fellow who was entrapped in the cul-de-sac? For a moment he was

in a mind to carry out the plan, when a grey goose shaft solved the problem. It struck the Norman between the eyes, and he sank on his knees in agony.

Surprised out of his caution by his comrade's cry, the second man leaped on to the stair, to receive a blow from the flat of Robin Hood's sword that laid him low.

For a few moments then the outlaw chief stood, while from above came the twang of the crossbows from the arrow slits and the faint shouts of Brasfer encouraging his little garrison.

Stepping swiftly down to the stone pinnacle which blocked the doorway, he strove by might and main to stir it from the path. He succeeded in forcing it back inch by inch, until at last it toppled over and went crashing down the steps.

"Robin Hood to the rescue! Charge, yeomen, charge! Sweet Liberty or Death!" he shouted, waving to the astonished foresters, who had given him up for dead.

But the Outlaw Prince did not wait for his reinforcements. He darted back to seize the entrance to the keep and hold it at all costs until his men could reach his side. He was scarcely in time, for Brasfer, alarmed by the outcry at the doorway which he had deemed secure, came leaping down the steps, sword in hand, to repel the attack.

But Robin Hood sprang upward at him like a tiger.

The Norman's blow cut down his guard and grazed his scalp so that the blood flowed freely.

But the outlaw's rush was so impetuous that he was within his assailant's guard, hacking and hewing, before Brasfer could follow up his advantage.

Then, dropping his sword, Robin Hood seized the knight by the legs and, with a wrestler's trick, raised him and pitched him clean over his head.

The Norman turned a somersault and fell head foremost with a crash on the stone steps, where he lay in a huddled heap.

Sick and faint from his wound, Robin Hood staggered and sank upon his knees. Then there came a shout, and he saw Little John striding upwards,

three steps at a time, followed by the eager foresters.

"On, comrades! Lose no time. At them before they can rally!" he could only say; then a crimson mist rose before his eyes and he fainted.

When he came to himself he found Wat o' the Woods dashing water in his face from Brasfer's own helmet, which he had filled at the castle well.

"How goes the fight?" Robin asked.

"The castle is as good as ours. The prison chamber of the womenfolk has been already won, and Little John is now beating in the door with his axe. Come, master, drink this, and we shall have you on your legs in a trice."

"Thanks, friend Wat. I am more stunned than hurt, methinks. My head rings like the great bell at York. But come, lift me up, and let me get on, for I shall never rest until I know that Marian is safe."

With the woodman's strong arm round his waist, Robin Hood mounted slowly up the steep stairs.

The ringing strokes of the giant's axe directed their footsteps to Maid Marian's prison, and the chief was just in time to see the door driven from its

hinges and to rush in and take his beloved in his arms.

* * * *

Brasfer's castle was put to the sack, and rich were the spoils which fell to the lot of the outlaws.

There were many in the band who endeavoured to persuade Robin Hood to make the castle his permanent stronghold, but he would not listen to the scheme.

"What," he said, "you ask me to retire into a hole, around which our enemies may gather and starve us out? No! Let us keep to the merry green-wood, where we are free to rove. Let the forest glades be our castles, and the oaks our palisades. Come, Sherwood ho! my lads, for I weary for the old sights and sounds—ay, and the old enemies."

"Sherwood ho!" echoed the foresters with a shout of delight.

"Ay, Sherwood ho!" said Wat o' the Woods, and then, turning to Little John, he added laughingly, "Longlegs, I have yet a bout of wrestling to finish with you, and with you, Will Scarlet, a test of archery. We will settle these anon."

THE END.

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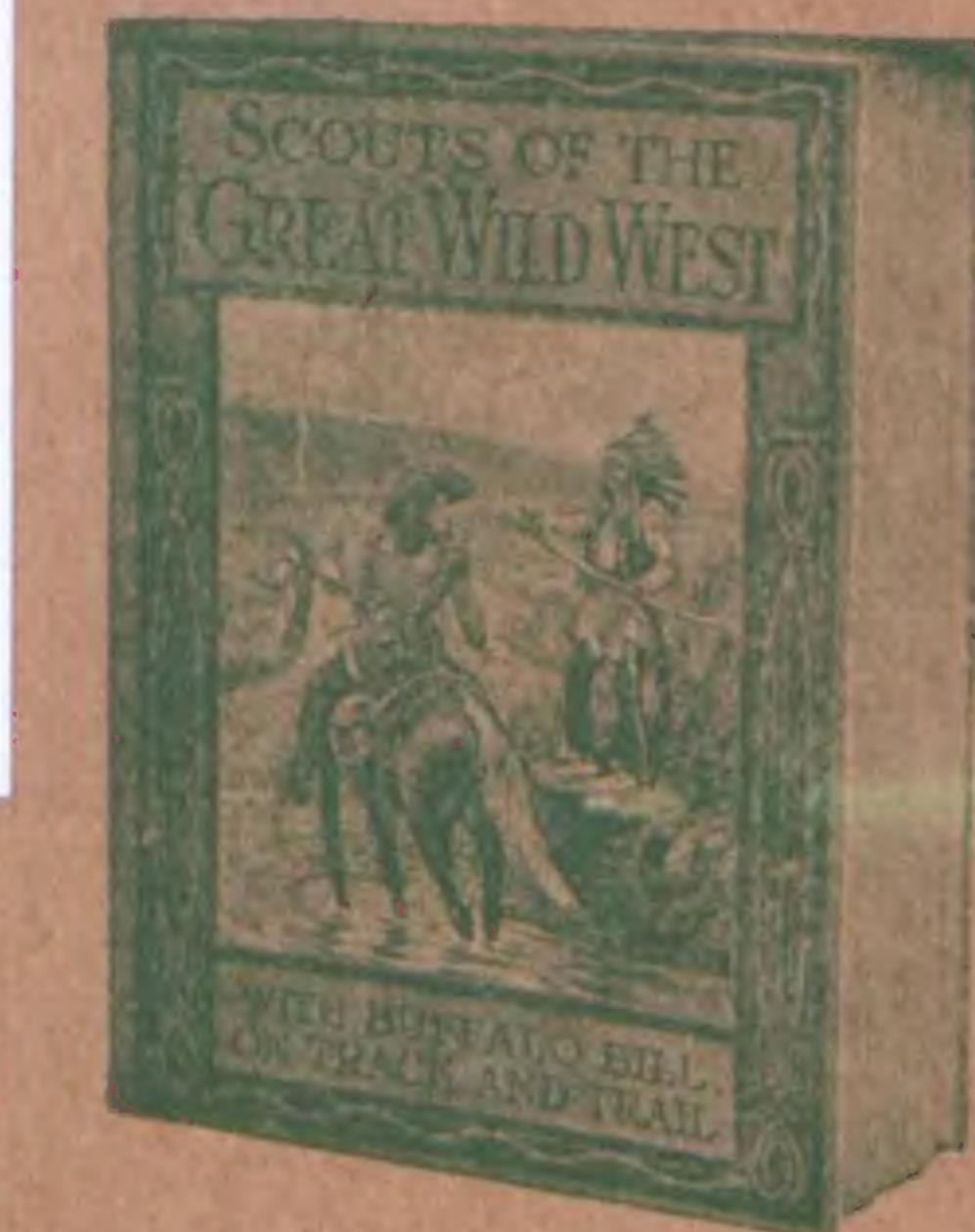
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